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CLOSED STACKS

Gov Docs

WPA REPLIES TO FARM CRITICS



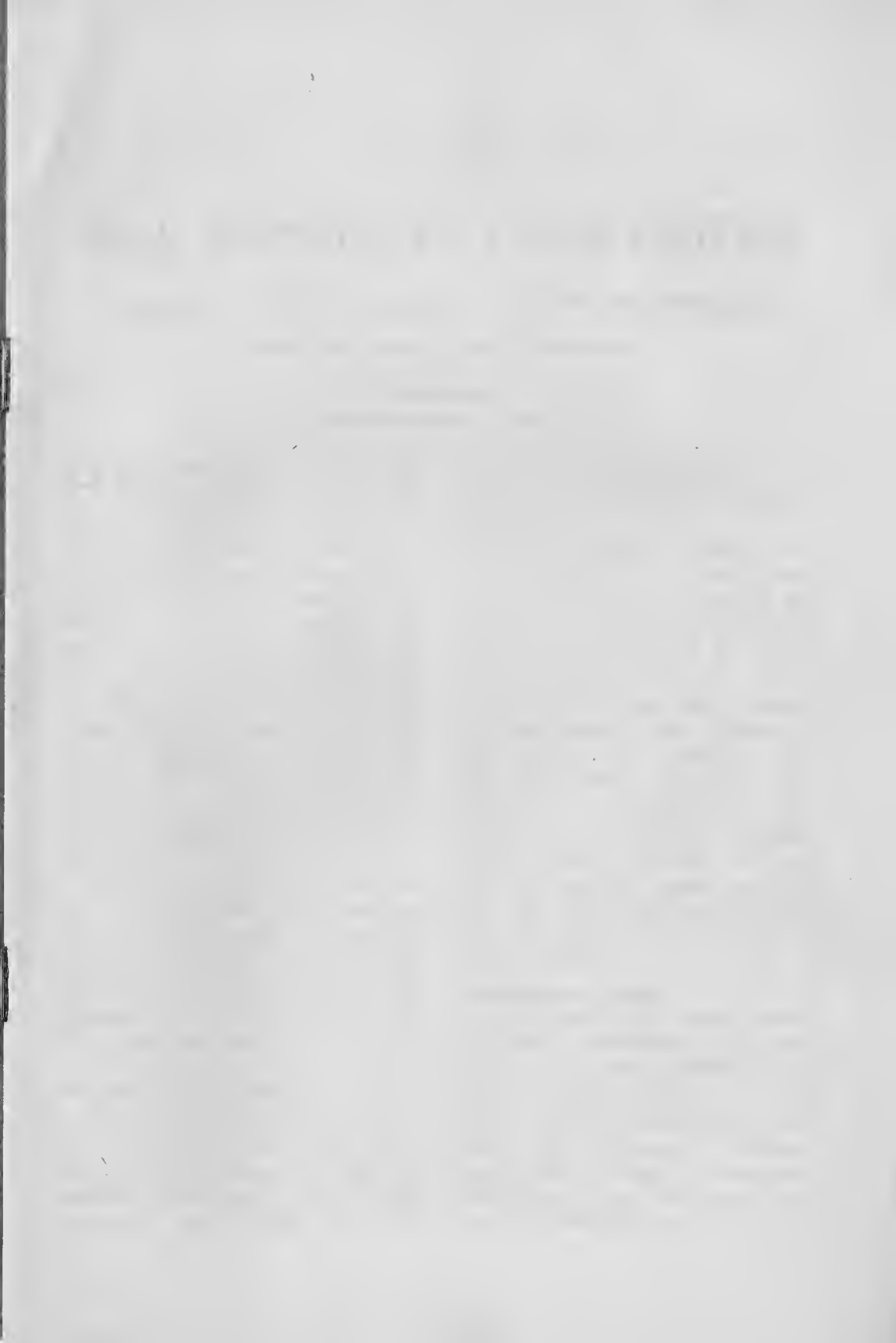
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WPA REPLIES TO FARM CRITICS

Says Men Will Be Released From Rolls for Seasonal Work but Not in Glut Numbers

By CORRINGTON GILL
Assistant Administrator, WPA

DURING the past four months the WPA has dropped about 750,000 people from its rolls. A large proportion of this reduction has taken place in agricultural areas in response to the need for seasonal farm labor.

The WPA and local agencies cooperate in planning progressive reductions of the rolls to supply farm labor. The mechanism in operation for the release of relief clients for seasonal labor is in effect this: The needs of the growers in a given area are reported in advance to the regional WPA offices through the various local employment services. The WPA releases from the rolls a sufficient number of workers to meet the demand.

This mechanism must obviously be kept flexible enough to accommodate itself to the tensions and problems of particular areas. It is clear that the efficiency of the process depends upon the efficiency of the local agencies in coordinating and synchronizing the demand with the need.

Shortage Held "Absurd"

With millions of people still unemployed, a shortage of farm labor is an absurdity. Nevertheless, complaints of such shortage have repeatedly been made. Many of these complaints have charged that WPA

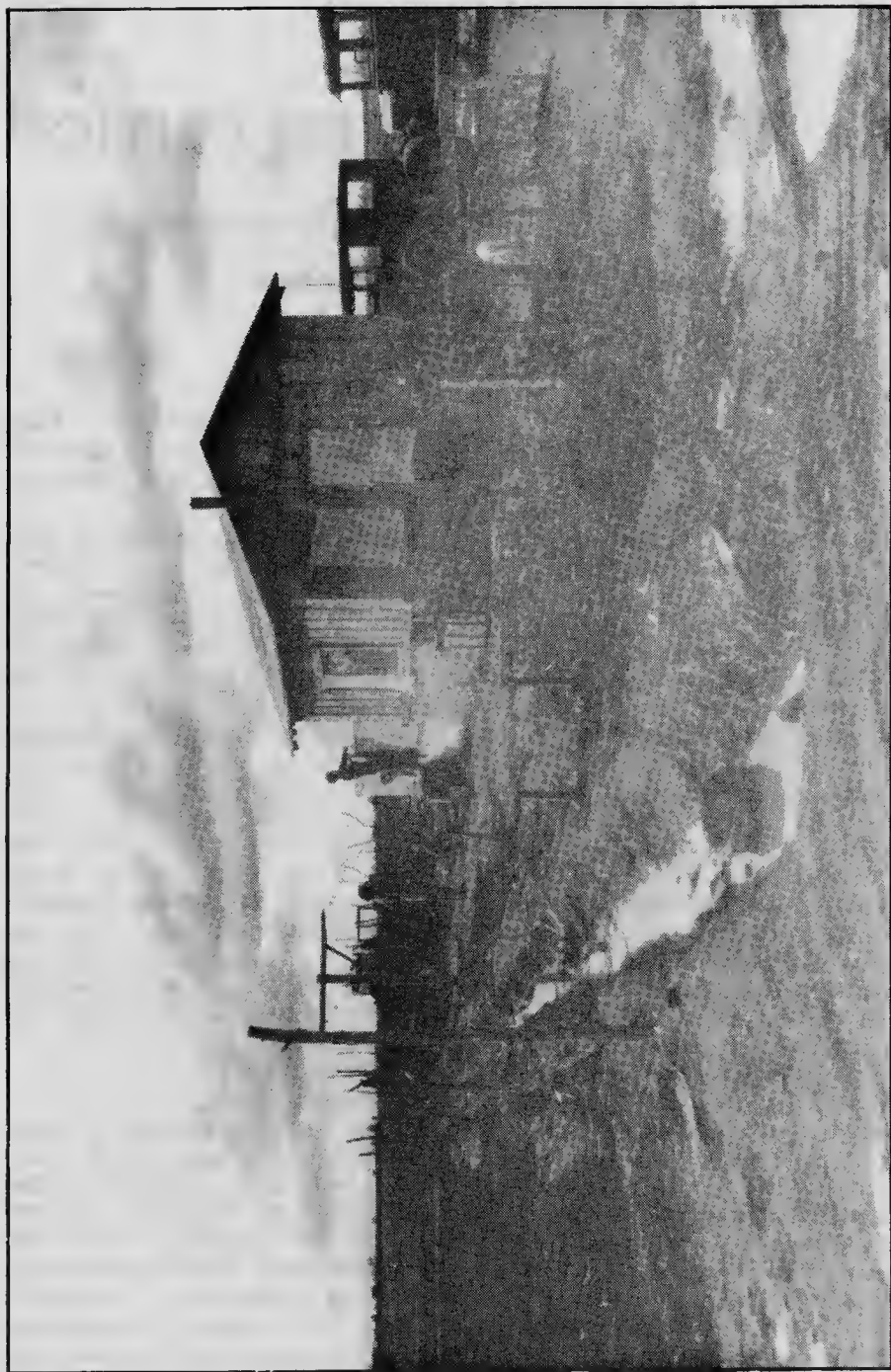
has created the shortage. They allege that relief clients have refused to accept private seasonal employment.

Beginning with the statement that any able-bodied adult who refuses a reasonable offer of private employment is immediately dropped from the relief rolls, I shall attempt to clear the air of some of the fog on this subject.

The cry of farm labor shortage is no new thing. Every Summer it is heard afresh. Conflicts over agricultural wage rates and working conditions have punctuated the history of our agricultural areas from the beginning of the century. The difference between the old complaints and the present ones is that the relief and works programs now offer a convenient place to lay the blame.

Investigations Made

During the last two years a series of careful investigations of such charges has been conducted by the Social Research Division of the WPA and the Federal, State and local Emergency Relief Administrations and employment services. The results of these investigations clarify the picture and reveal the many problems involved.



Resettlement Administration Photograph by Lang

HOME OF A MIGRANT WORKER'S FAMILY

In response to numerous complaints of labor shortage in the Wallace strawberry area near Wilmington, N. C., last year, the New Hanover County Relief Administration investigated the field. On a day when the morning paper carried an advertisement calling for 1,000 workers in the strawberry fields, only two growers could be found who needed help, and their total demand was for eleven pickers.

In 1935 the FERA investigated a reported labor shortage in the raspberry fields of Hammonton, N. J. Published accounts of the shortage were so distorted that the number of pickers reported as necessary was greater than the total number of seasonal workers in the area. The actual period over which more workers could have been used in the berry fields lasted only for eight or nine days of peak activity. All able-bodied single men and about ninety families containing experienced adult berry pickers had previously been removed from the relief rolls.

In an effort to aid growers, the Atlantic County Relief Administration had offered to recruit adult pickers from outlying parts of the county if transportation to the fields were provided; the offer was not accepted. Likewise, the Relief Administration's offer to provide transportation was rejected. The Relief Administration was unwilling to recruit families, since that would mean forcing child labor into the berry fields. Investigation could not discover a single relief client who had refused a berry-picking job.

The latest charges made against WPA workers are typical. Recent press reports stated that nine out of every ten sugar-beet workers were refusing work in the beet fields

of Colorado, the assumption being that these people preferred working on WPA projects to taking beet-field employment. Investigation reveals a different story.

At least seven weeks before the opening of the beet-work season in Colorado, 1,200 workers considered likely to obtain seasonal employment were separated from the WPA to provide an adequate supply of beet labor. Other dismissals followed, and by May 15 about 3,000 beet-worker families had been dropped. Workers usually employed in the beet fields obviously could not be refusing beet-field jobs in order to remain on WPA for the simple reason that they were no longer on WPA jobs.

Other Complaints

Complaints that farmers could not obtain farm labor because of the WPA program came this Spring from the "green vegetable" area of Costilla County, Colorado. Yet not a single farmer could be discovered who was unable to obtain all the labor that he could use.

Reports that a farm labor shortage existed in Minnesota because of WPA and CCC employment prompted an investigation this Spring by the National Employment Service and the United States Employment Service in the State. This report shows that no shortage existed and that the lively demand for farm labor had been met without difficulty.

In the cases cited it was evident that the labor supply had been understated and the need for labor exaggerated. Obviously, the greater the supply of labor is in excess of real needs, the lower the wage that it is able to get.

Given the present situation, a false inflation of demand tends to enlarge the supply of labor in two



Resettlement Administration Photograph by Lang

LARGE PEA PICKERS CAMP IN CALIFORNIA

ways: (1) Unemployed workers concentrate in the area of the reported demand, and (2) relief agencies reduce their rolls, since jobs are apparently available. The large supply gives the employer more bargaining power than he would have if the supply exactly fitted or fell below his needs. Although not all growers distort their needs, some unquestionably do.

Inflated stories of demand for farm labor do not constitute the whole story. Poor housing, long hours, child labor and low wages for back-breaking labor are not especially enticing. The astounding thing is not that an occasional worker might prefer to stay on relief but that, even in most instances where working conditions are substandard, relief clients are found to be eager to take private jobs. As a result of the stigma of laziness attached to relief persons, they often are forced to take employment when it is available, regardless of the job, the pay or the conditions. Such a condition, created by a falsely stimulated public opinion, is grossly unfair.

Pickers' Wages

In the Wallace strawberry area of North Carolina, for example, wages had been said to amount to \$1.50 or \$2 a day, but investigation among the pickers at work showed the average wage to be about 35 cents for an eight or ten hour day. Living accommodations were so limited on some farms that in one case twelve white workers slept in a one-room shanty near a pigpen.

In Hammonton many raspberry pickers reported that they had previously experienced difficulty in collecting their wages; in some cases they had not been paid at all or had received only county scrip.

Certainly, it is not the place of the works program to force WPA workers to take private employment under unreasonable living conditions or wages. It is the administration's policy that employers who are paying standard and going rates of wages be fully protected and that our organization not be used as a means of forcing workers to accept substandard wages from anybody. As Administrator Hopkins put it in a recent radio broadcast: "Nobody is to have a Works Progress Administration job who has refused private employment at a fair wage. You can be equally sure that we are not going to kick anybody out of these low-paid jobs just so some bird can get a lot of cheap labor."

"Labor Supply Ample"

Reports from the agricultural States indicate that, with slight variations in certain localities, the supply of farm workers is being kept ample to meet the demand through planned reductions of WPA rolls.

Increased need for farm workers is expected to arise as harvesting begins. By dropping workers who refuse farm jobs at the going rate of pay and cutting from the WPA rolls a sufficient number of workers of the type needed, an adequate labor supply will be made available without throwing onto local relief workers for whom there is no farm employment.

In the past, general relief closings made in response to demands for farm labor have not resulted in sufficient farm employment to warrant the general scope of the closings. Last Summer all relief was cut off in the South Dakota area so that labor would be available. It appeared upon investigation to

have been too drastic a cut. In only one-third of the closed households interviewed had a member succeeded in getting a harvest-field job. For those who had got some work the average length of job was but seventeen days and the average earnings for the season were \$33.75 a person. Spotty crop conditions and numerous demands on the "crop dollar" had made it financially impossible for many farmers to hire workers. The cry of "labor shortage" and "shirkers on relief" had come from farmers who had expected farm hands to work for \$1 a day and keep themselves, and who, unable to find workers under those conditions, issued loud and outraged protests.

Present Policy to Continue

The function of the works program is to offer a means of support to needy workers for whom there are no private jobs, and to free them for private employment as it becomes available. In fulfillment of this function the administration will continue its policy of reducing WPA employment to assure an ample labor supply, at the same time avoiding the creation of glutted labor markets. Its present rigorous policy of immediate dismissal from WPA employment of any worker found to be unjustifiably refusing a job will be continued, but the local WPA authorities will also continue to uphold workers in refusal to accept jobs at sub-standard wages or with unreasonable working condition.



Children's bureau of U. S. Department Labor

DUGOUT HOME OF BEET WORKERS FAMILY OF TEN PERSONS

